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Weekend of Sunday, October 17, 2021
21st Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 29/Proper 24/Year B
First Reading: Isaiah 53:4-12
Second Reading: Hebrews 5:1-10
Gospel Reading: Mark 10:35-45
Sermon Title: “The Virtue of Servanthood”

Theme

On the way to Jerusalem the disciples ask Jesus to grant them seats of honor. Jesus responds by announcing that he and his followers will “rule” through self-giving service.

Text

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” ³⁶And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” ³⁷And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” ³⁹They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Sermon

I was a shooting star as a corporate trainee at Parker Hannifin Cylinder Division. Though I was hired out of college to work at the Sebring, Ohio plant, about a year later, in the fall of 1982, they closed that plant and I was transferred to the Chicago plant. Less than a year later I was transferred to the St. Mary's Ohio plant where I was successful in a highly visible assignment. The Division Manager was so impressed with my work that he asked me what *I* wanted to do next. I had heard of plans to open a new state-of-the-art manufacturing plant in North Carolina and I asked if I could be considered for that assignment, and he made it happen.

The people who were working on that project were, of course, focused on getting the plant built and so on, but other than get the assignment, I didn't know much about it. As a young married man without children yet, I was curious how much my new assignment would pay. So one day I went to lunch with the Manufacturing Manager, a man by the name of Larry Kendrick, who I knew was fond of me. When the time was right I asked him, "How much does a responsibility like this pay?" Larry looked at me and I saw the disappointment in his eyes. Then he said, "I've never asked about pay in my life. I've always focused on doing my best work and the company has always taken care of me." Dang! I wish I would have thought of that before I asked for the meeting! I shrunk down in my seat right then and there. We did work out an agreement but I never raised the issue of my pay again.

Has it ever happened to you? You asked someone a question that you thought was perfectly legit, and then when the other person responded, you wished you could have that moment back – but you can't retract those words once they've left your lips.

This is what I see happening in the Gospel Reading for today. James (not the brother of Jesus) and John, his brother, were also known by another name – the "sons of thunder." Bible scholars think they earned that name because they were boisterous and impetuous, loud, and not particularly couth. And this story is an example of them being themselves.

What they did was take Jesus aside and ask if they could have the seats to his left and right when he came into his glory. Allow me to parse that: If the king is the

highest power in the land, then proximity to the king is the next highest power. So to be on Jesus' left and right when he came into his glory would be the best they could do. Won't Mom be proud? By the way, if this is not how you remember the story that is because Matthew told it differently. In his version, it was the mother of James (not the brother of Jesus) and John who asked if Jesus would put her sons on his left and right – but I digress.

Jesus challenged their line of thinking by asking them if they really knew what they were asking. What he actually said was,

“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”³⁹ They replied, “We are able.”

“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” Truly not knowing what they so ambitiously asked for, they emphatically replied, “We are able.” Boisterous and impetuous, loud, and not particularly couth.

Well, we 21st Century disciples know that no, they didn't. They didn't have a clue what they were signing up for.

Last week's Gospel Reading ended at 10:31. You will remember in that reading that Jesus was confronted by a man with many possessions whom he invited to become a disciple. Today's reading begins with 10:35; there are three verses left out. Would you like to know what they are? I think it matters to this conversation that is today's Gospel Reading.

³²They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; ³⁴they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

³²They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; Remember I told you last week that Jesus was focused on making his way to Jerusalem to meet his destiny. They (the disciples) were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. Remember that he had just told them ‘eternal life’ was more difficult to attain than they thought. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; ³⁴they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

Now I know that our weekly Gospel Readings are not entirely in a linear sequence, but this is not the first time, according to Mark, that Jesus has predicted his Passion. It's not even the second time he mentioned it. This was the third time since he turned his face toward Jerusalem. And it was after that, I don't know if it was a minute after that or an hour after that, but certainly on that same journey, that James (not the brother of Jesus) and John thought, "This is a good time to ask for the seats on his left and right when he comes into his glory. Hey Jesus, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Excellent timing.

From there, Jesus challenged the integrity of their request, told them that those positions were not his to grant. The other disciples heard about it and they were angry – truth be known, they were probably angry that they hadn't thought of it! But then Jesus upbraided them all for their ambition. 'You are behaving like the Gentiles, godless people. It shall not be so among you.'

You see, they were acting out of their real-world paradigm. A king rules, and being close to the king meant power, and power meant things were going to be well for them. But they had not paid attention to their Lord's teaching, had they? Nor had they paid attention to the prophets of old.

The prophet Isaiah foretold one who would come to serve through suffering. Isn't it interesting how we overlook what we don't want to hear and know?

Perhaps a generation after Jesus' Passion, the apostle Paul spoke of Jesus as the great high priest who *would not make* sacrifices for the sins of the people, but who would *become* the sacrifice for the sins for *all* people.

The point is that Jesus did not become Christ, God's anointed, through military or political victory, but through obedient servanthood. And to those twelve he called to be his disciples he taught by his own example:

- The first among you must be slave of all.
- Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.
- The washer of feet.
- The forgiver of sins.
- The Lamb of God.

To them and to us he taught "The Virtue of Servanthood." There is no power, no authority, no prestige to be handed out. The ministry of Jesus the Christ would be based upon ... servanthood.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

James (not the brother of Jesus) and John - aren't they just like people! Maybe just like us!

Speaking of 'just like us,' did you see that William Shatner finally went where few have gone before? When he came back down and landed safely, he was just about in tears for what he had experienced for 11 minutes. Many of us remember him as Captain Kirk the brave commander of the Starship Enterprise. But this week we were reminded that he is just like us. He is really just an actor, just a poser, he is not a brave adventurer at all, he was scared. We would have probably been scared too.

Few of us, if any of us, will attain any notoriety.

- No buildings will be named after us.
- No best-selling books will be authored by us.
- No seats of power will be attained by us.

But that's just fine. None of that will matter. Jesus Christ our Lord indicates that the path to greatness and our ultimate goal, eternal life, is through servanthood

modeled after himself. The only source of any goodness in us is found through Christ and his sacrifice. We accomplish nothing on our own.

When I get to heaven I expect to see Jesus and Moses and Elijah and all the saints of old. But in addition to that relatively short list of biblical heroes, what I hope I see is a great throng of people who quietly, selflessly, anonymously did the right thing following him. They, we, modeled our lives after his, and lived lives of servanthood.

Whatever happened to James (not the brother of Jesus) and John? I am so glad you asked. James became known as James the Great, and that was probably because he was the first apostle to be martyred. The fiery rhetoric that earned him the nickname one of the “sons of thunder,” cost him his head by the sword, at the order of King Herod Agrippa in about 44 AD.

John, his brother, may have lived on to write much of the New Testament. Legend has it that he was the longest surviving apostle of Christ. Sentenced to hard labor on the island quarry of Patmos, John was given the vision we see recorded in the book of Revelation. He might have been the author of the Gospel of John and the Letters of John, the one whom Jesus loved, uniquely and for all time proclaiming the love of Christ.

Let us pray that as he did with James (not the brother of Jesus) and John, he will lovingly and gently form us into saints – not necessarily ones who light the world on fire with our witness, but ones who are faithful in following our Lord in “The Virtue of Servanthood.”

Prayer

Holy Father, today we are reminded that a life of discipleship under your Son and our Lord Jesus Christ is a life of self-giving service, sacrificial giving, serving not being served, all of this without the expectation of reward *in this life*. Inspire us by his Gospel to accept his invitation to follow him in a life of servanthood. And should you find us faithful, welcome us into your eternal bliss. We pray this in his name, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.